

WILD WAYS: TRAINHOPPING CULTURE OF THE UNITED STATES

by

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Rachel Corr and has been approved by the members of her/his supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of The Honors College and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences.

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## ABSTRACT

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The practice of trainhopping has historical roots in the post-Civil War period and during the Great Depression, when large migrations of penniless individuals caught rides on freight cars to find employment or adventure. Trainhopping is still widely practiced, however modern day trainhopping culture has not received appropriate scholarly attention as a specific subculture. To understand the choices and motivations of members of this subculture, I undertook an ethnographic project wherein I interviewed trainhoppers, in addition to analyzing the historical precedent set for contemporary trainhopping practice. Through my research I analyze the drive to live within a state of liminality in relation to society, where an individual is situated between the poles of interaction with predominant society and marginal society. This research will advance our understanding of self-identification with a liminal group within the context of a contemporary subculture.

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## Introduction

Hopping aboard freight trains as a means of traversing the United States has persisted through history, remaining a viable mode of travel for those seeking adventure, and even still, occasional work. As in the past, contemporary trainhoppers do not make up a homogenous population but are found among the marginal populations of predominant society, wherein subsistence strategies and cultural groups overlap to constitute a heterogeneous marginal society related to the predominant society. To the transient, specifics of behavior, dress, and sense of cultural history draw a clear line of demarcation between themselves, the sedentary homeless population, and the impoverished. The idea of “the” hobo may then be conceptualized as an archetype, an origin myth from which contemporary trainhoppers develop a sense of identity and formulate expressions distinct from other transients (hitchhikers, tourists, etc.). The hobo is a folk icon of Americana often associated with the Great Depression, wandering for work and leisure across the United States. The ongoing relevance of freight train activity, and thus a means of travel, together with history and myth, has allowed hobo culture to persist to this day.

This study takes the form of ethnographic analysis to locate components that constitute a specific U.S. culture, which is neither strictly predominant nor marginal. Trainhoppers are not a homogenous group but demonstrate shared ethos, symbolism, vernacular, and origin myth. Ethnographies are mere snap shots in time, particularly in the contemporary period of ever expanding communications technology; thus the first section of this thesis will trace the origins of the hobo figure, linking this history to a

contemporary culture that, despite alterations, has persisted through the advent of the modern era. Then contemporary trainhopping culture is analyzed via ethnographic interviews with two “retired” trainhoppers that reveal common ethics, processes of enculturation, and perceptions of change to the culture. The aim of this study is to examine these shared themes and provide an ethnographic account of contemporary trainhopping culture that is linked to the hobo practices of American history.

Otherwise unaffiliated individuals are brought together by this culture shared through a marginal lifestyle, complete with a range of folklore, vernacular, and symbolism. The history of the hobo serves as an origin myth from which contemporary rail riders from widely different backgrounds draw a common thread and connection with one another. To develop a greater understanding of this confluence, “hobo” must first be defined and understood as an expression of identity and an object of public discourse, the latter tending to treat the hobo as the member of a homogenized homeless population. The expression of hobo identity through specific practices speak to how an individual lives their life and as a distinction between themselves, inhabitants of marginal society, and predominant society alike. For the purposes of this research, analysis will be primarily dedicated to *hobo culture* - built around hobo history and participation in modes of life, modified over time with links to the past. By making reference to *hobo culture* I hope to distinguish the *hobo* of historic casual working class roles, from the contemporary appropriations of that legacy shared by other social groups. Important to note is that throughout hobo history, travelers of many class backgrounds are found,

emphasizing a fluid identity that can be adapted to a variety of social or subcultural groups.

To place the hobo in a historical context I will begin with a review of literature tracing the development of the hobo in American consciousness to explore the role of the hobo in relation to marginal and predominant society. This review demonstrates a culture forming through a legacy of reverence for the freight train as a symbol of autonomy, in addition to a dialogism with the wider marginal population in shared structural position to predominant society, authority, and norms. This legacy is documented through an expansive literature of fact and fiction, from Jack London to Bob Dylan, among others, maintaining a presence in the American consciousness; serving to effectively resurrect ongoing discourses surrounding the hobo and a wider analysis of the space between predominant and marginal. From these outlets, subsequent transient generations map an ongoing history in which to draw an understanding of the self as situated within that history. In this space between marginal and predominant exists the potential for conflict as impetus to travel takes the form at one pole of “bohemian” wanderlust, and class negation at another, often the result of structural position or trauma.

In certain respects, class negation or disillusionment serves as a mediator in such conflict as discontent with prevailing norms leads to ideological bond. Subcultural groups form between prevailing culture and an ambivalence towards the mainstream, wherein rather than being pushed to the margins in every case, subcultures are just as often *drawn* to the margins. Politics are encapsulated in these subcultural milieus, either finding expression or serving as an introduction to a kind of political critique which is by

nature marginal to that of predominant discourse. Disillusionment is common in this case as a result or a requisite, as individuals experiencing disillusionment will be drawn to these subcultures or develop a level of disillusionment from their experiences found within. By reviewing Victor Turner's theory of liminality the mechanisms of social cohesion in the absence of rigid structure are located, demonstrating the resilience of cultural development. These factors serve to illustrate how hobo practices have worked in tandem to maintain what I posit is a contemporary trainhopping culture that draws upon the hobo archetype as an origin myth, complete with distinct history located in a variety of cultural and literary expressions, resilient over time through an ideological consistency within those that Turner describes as "liminal entities."

## **1. Hobo history**

The hobo emerged with the initial momentum of the railroad industry in a symbiotic relationship, solidifying the symbol of American itinerant labor from construction of railroads to seasonal agricultural harvests. Despite this imagery, a component of hobo origin myth, what kind of person or activity constitutes a hobo is not so easily summed up. The word hobo originated around 1889, though hobo practices had begun in earnest at the end of the Civil War (Tapley 2014: 27). In 1922 Nicholas Klein suggests in the *Dearborn Independent* that the word hobo "originated from the words "hoe-boy" plainly derived from work on the farm" (Anderson 1923: 88). Other interpretations include a shorthand for "homeward bound," a correlation to Civil War soldiers riding trains back to their homes after the war. A contemporary, if only

semiserious variation that I've heard in person is "Help Other Brother Out", speaking either to begging, in the same vein as the folk song "Brother, can you spare a dime?" or a general solidarity of communal relations with other transients.

As the network of railroad lines expanded across the United States, the new mobility afforded by trains opened new opportunities for those willing to take on the risks of travel for employment or wanderlust. While industrialization gained steady pace in the United States there emerged those that worked within the expanding industry and many that would become defined by their relationship with the machinations of industry. In this particular case, the westward crawl of railroad networks provided not only employment, but an improvised mode of transport for individuals seeking work or adventure, two important aspects of hobo identity, on new frontiers. Comparing historical and contemporary definitions and word play regarding hobo identity marks a distinction between the hobo as a historic type of itinerant individual situated in the influence of 19<sup>th</sup> century market forces, and the distinct *cultural characteristics* of that history (such as traveling by freight train, and emphasis on autonomy with mutual aid) that are still currently practiced, forming a *hobo culture* in a contemporary context.

Despite the association of migratory labor practices with the expansion of the railroad, the completion of the transcontinental railroad meant, as Nicholas Thoburn notes, that the frontier was swiftly "dissipating with the growth and consolidation of mining and manufacturing towns and the development of the automobile" (Thoburn 2003: 72). The result of this shift in industrial needs affected the perception of the hobo as an icon of frontier life and "rugged individualism" to an anachronism, a failure to

adapt to developing society and a hindrance to the ongoing progress of that society.

“Hobo” has since served as a designation used with myriad connotations, as an expression of identity and distinction among transients and as an object of public discourse. Heather Tapley’s work on shifting conceptions of masculinity among hobos, traces this shift to the series of economic depressions of 1873, which Tapley suggests “altered the representation of the hobo from that of a rugged individual, recognized as a sign of economic growth, to that of the tramp, the economic other.” The delineation between behavioral nuances is effectively muddled in the popular consciousness, as Tapley suggests the old use of “tramp” was “a popular and collective term for hobos, bums, itinerant workers, peddlers and scam artists that was used by the American public to define unemployed men, perceived as able bodied, who wandered into towns and local urban communities” (Tapley 2014: 28). From this definition the hobo is situated in a position of marginality in relation to society and undistinguished among a wider scope of the homeless population. The definition of tramp given by Tapley becomes a general word for the homeless, transients, and itinerant workers due to the similar modes of subsistence used by a range of marginal populations. Likewise, Thoburn states that “hobos were simultaneously workers, outsiders, shirkers, and ‘hobohemians’, and it was through their anomalous positions, on the borderlines of these forms and relations, that their political and cultural invention occurred” (Thoburn 2003: 72). Several themes in this passage merit discussion, foremost is the hobo as a fluid identity, rather than simply referring to a wandering laborer. Another important theme is the relationship of the hobo to *work*, for while the hobo was born of increasing need for labor, the relationship of the hobo to labor and the railroad is a component of the Americana origin myth situating the

hobo in a specific period of history. What emerges from these analyses is that historically, hobos occupy a variety of social spheres if only for a period of time, a state of being that is a part of predominant society yet marginal, sharing modes of subsistence with marginal populations and self-distinguishing from the rest of that population.

The cultural and political invention mentioned by Thoburn emerges from the aggregation of shared practices and space “on the borderlines.” While hobos may have distinguished themselves from members of the homeless population, they nevertheless exist as members of a marginal society; maintaining an antagonistic relationship with predominant society through utilization of social services, serving as temporary labor, and interactions with the public who may or may not distinguish hobos as distinct from the sedentary homeless. The way that members of transient culture distinguish themselves from the homeless or workers in the historical literature is indicative of how hobos situated themselves in relation or opposition to society and other members of the transient or homeless population. “In particular, hobos produced discourses that overtly separated the self-identified hobo from the tramp. As early as 1889 and as late as 1915, hobos continued to classify themselves as decidedly different from tramps, the canopy term under which they had been placed by the public” (Tapley 2014: 37). A measure of classification that can still be heard on the road to this day is “the hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders and the bum drinks and wanders” (Anderson 1923: 87) By that measure, “tramp” is presented as a traveler with wanderlust, while the hobo is associated with work – but both possess a penchant for traveling by train. Considerable overlap occurs in subsistence strategies during hard times: ‘flying a sign’

(panhandling), ‘spanging’ a combination of *spare* and *change*, asking passersby for money, ‘trash picking’ and ‘dumpster diving’, attendance of soup kitchens, and so on, are contemporary terms for strategies utilized by marginal individuals since the advent of the modern era. Important to note as well is the public perception of hobos, tramps, and bums as being under the same canopy of terminology, for the general public the differences are difficult to detect or unimportant, particularly when modes of life seems to share such a considerable overlap. In an urban setting the socialization of hobos and tramps with the sedentary homeless occurs in shared space that marginal populations occupy. Additionally, the occupation of urban space facilitates interaction between transients, state institutions, and the public.

In the context of 1922 Chicago, a specific area would emerge as ‘Hobohemia’ where sociologist Nels Anderson would work for the ‘Committee on Homeless Men’, to “study the problem of the migratory casual worker.” The Committee Preface to Anderson’s published study notes that previously “Mr. Anderson...had shared their experiences “on the road” and at work, and had visited the Hobohemian areas of many of the large western cities” (Anderson 1923: ix). The reference to “hobohemian areas” is significant as a specific urban space, by no means limited to Chicago. In this respect a hobohemian area would, as Anderson describes, be where “characteristic institutions have arisen – cheap hotels, lodging houses, flops, eating joints, outfitting shops, employment agencies, missions, radical bookstores, welfare agencies, economic and political institutions – to minister to the needs, physical and spiritual, of the homeless man” (Anderson 1923: 15). While hobos of the past and present utilize social services as

a method of resource gathering, distinction emerges in utilization of space and manner of living. The hobo “jungle” becomes significant in this respect. While a more or less sedentary homeless population may be required to occupy urban areas close to centers providing services, hobos develop specific space in the “jungles” that are situated near freight train yards. “Jungles are usually located in close proximity to a railroad division point, where the trains are made up or where trains stop to change crews and engines” (Anderson 1923: 16). The spots that have proven consistently advantageous for hopping a train are often referred to as “hop out spots” or “catch out spots.” These are specific marginal spaces wherein an (ideal) neutrality fosters the formulation of ethics necessary in the restructuring of social strata. Jungles are more than stopping off points, Anderson suggests that jungles are social space where “hobo tradition and law are formulated and transmitted. It is the nursery of tramp lore. Here the fledgling learns to behave like an old timer” (Anderson 1923: 26). A hop out spot might not be a jungle, but a jungle may serve as a hop out spot depending on the area available to make camp, the under sides of bridges often serve as both in contemporary industrial settings. Another consideration for jungle and catch out spots is the proximity to available resources, in a contemporary context a gas station may serve as a popular resupply point. Hobo culture is defined by a position on the margins of predominant society and proximity to freight trains as an important cultural feature of hobo history. Freight trains have been utilized in American industry since their inception and the proximity of hobo culture to freight trains likewise has persisted, albeit in smaller numbers than during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Traveling or hobo *culture* becomes distinct through a relationship with trains and affirmation of marginality. For clarity, references will be made to “trainhoppers” rather than “tramp” or “hobo” in an effort to join together the hobo myth and historic narrative with the freight train riders of the contemporary period. *Trainhopper* will serve to describe those that participate in *hobo culture* by traveling by freight train. As demonstrated by analysis of the terms hobo and tramp, many motivations for travel and the pursuit of, abdication, or casual attitude towards work – render the hobo or tramp as fluid states of being and intention. Furthermore hobo culture is practiced by individuals from many cultural groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. In a manner of speaking, the initiation rite to hobo culture would be the individual’s will, the decision to ride freight trains and take on the risks associated with that decision. Hobo *culture* is then open to being co-opted and participated in by a variety of subcultural groups, the emphasis on a *state of being* as the only measure of participation and lifestyle. Nevertheless, hobo culture exists on the margins of society, if only by the willful affirmation of marginality and non-conformity. Self-marginalization is an individual decision and functions as an expression of ideological differences, rather than a simple assertion of contrarian identity. Thoburn suggests “it is possible to see the hobos’ mode of ‘exclusion’ as marking less an outsider identity, than a minoritarian ‘willed poverty’ that was functional to an overcoming of their structural positions and identities” (Thoburn 2003: 73). In such a case willed poverty (or at least a willed habitation of the margins of society), casual attitude towards work or wandering seasonal labor, and an antagonistic relationship to institutional authority is representative of a disillusionment with the normalcy of modern society and culture. As Heather Tapley has suggested in her

analysis: the “US medicine and media and the US government all constructed the hobo as a failed instance of bourgeois manhood, while hobos and hobo organizations produced him as the heroic conscientious objector to middle-class models of masculinity that emphasized stasis and the accumulation of profit” (Tapley 2014: 26). In this manner the hobo as a historical figure is both a benign product and critique of increasingly capitalist modes of production. ‘Benign’ to implicate the role of the hobo as a persistent feature of American history that would go on to produce the culture that takes this legacy as an *origin myth*, co-opted and reimagined by a variety of subcultural groups. In one respect this should come as no surprise, for as the railroad was initially a booming capitalist enterprise that witnessed the birth of the historic hobo, the railroad retains significance for the economy through transportation services - and as an enduring symbol of hobo culture.

Marginality carries different implications for individuals and cultural groups, thus being a different experience for each group and individual. The context of hobo history illustrates a clear demarcation between types of transients, sedentary impoverished, and individuals or groups that occupy the margins due to an ambivalence with established society (political dissidents, etc.). Just as in mainstream society, marginal society is comprised of myriad class backgrounds, socioeconomic histories, political persuasions, and reasons for living on the margins of predominant society. Those who live on the margins are partially separate from established society and thus in a position of liminality by way of that structural position. For transients this liminality is literal and figurative as movement from one point to another, and a state of being that an individual experiences

inhabiting the margins. Victor Turner's work covering the function of liminality in ritual rites is instructive for developing a greater comprehension of the concept of liminality, describing the attributes of liminality as "necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (Turner 1969: 95). Those in a state of liminality are not a homogenous population, and as Turner goes on to emphasize "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1969: 95). This ambiguity is witnessed in the historic colloquial use of hobo, then tramp, and the related pushback from transients seeking to assert their identity as "hobos" in an effort to distance themselves from the parasitic or criminal elements associated with the term "tramp" in public discourse of the time. Nevertheless, living as a liminal being within the margins of society renders individual identity negligible within a structure that seeks to administer, order and classify, for better or ill. Expanding the concept of liminality, Lucy Jayne Kamau suggests that "liminal conditions can be found in a number of situations, some of brief duration, some occurring over long periods of time. They include initiations, religious pilgrimages, monasticism, boot camps, revolutionary groups, and intentional communities. In all these situations, life is lived outside normal society and on the margins" (Kamau 2002: 19). The experience of marginal life, whether through impoverishment, homelessness, or a willed rejection of predominant society, are other appropriate examples. Turner's work on ritual coupled with the examples presented by Kamau display the concept of liminality as both a formal rite of passage as is the case with rituals, and a state that is experienced on the margins of society where the very word

“marginal” implies separation from the predominant order. In the context of ritual time may seem suspended as the ritual participants are intended to experience separation from their familiar life, and be moved through the course of the ritual from one status position (religious standing, fertility, etc.) to another upon effective completion.

How then do liminal entities from different groups find commonality? In the case of marginal society, overlapping subsistence strategies and modes of life are only a small component that do not speak to how an individual conceptualizes marginality. To dispense with homogenization of marginal society: simply because one regularly attends a soup kitchen, that does not necessarily make them part of a cultural group, any more than are patrons of a grocery store. Shared spaces are nevertheless important for cultural exchange, facilitating knowledge sharing between otherwise culturally divergent individuals. Turner suggests that liminal entities share a type of communion by their relation to society, articulating the difference between prevailing society and marginal society inhabited by liminal peoples. Turner states that “there are here two major “models” for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating. The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of “more” or “less”. The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (Turner 1969: 96). Turner goes on to refer to the latter as “communitas” to clarify the experience of shared liminality within that marginal position,

communion. Although Turner mentions “general authority of the ritual elders” this is specifically in the context of his fieldwork. The role of the elder is no less important among transients however, for even as *communitas* is often classless, deference is typically given to those with expansive cultural knowledge and experience, setting precedents in terms of behavior and carrying the oral tradition necessary to sustain a culture.

Researching patterns of transients in 1940 led Theodore Caplow to assert that “a certain degree of cohesion always exists within the vagrant class, from a vague *spirit de corps*, to the development of complete dialects, hierarchies, and parasitic economic systems” and that “the efforts of the authorities to suppress the class as a whole, while keeping some or all of the individuals from starvation, sets up an ambivalence between repression and relief” (Caplow 1940: 732). The development of culture on the margin is necessitated and reinforced by the ambivalent relationship with predominant society. In this case hobo culture experiences *communitas* through mutual interest and a specific structural relation to authorities of predominant society. Motivation for traveling falls into a series of patterns, as Caplow posits travelers “leave home because of unemployment, the desire to travel, family disorganization, petty crime, trouble with a woman, ill health...By far the most frequent reasons given are economic pressure and wanderlust” (Caplow 1940: 735). Wanderlust in particular, the shared concept of individual liberty apart from predominant society, and the self-awareness of taking part in a component of unique Americana, all contribute to the experience of *communitas* in hobo culture. The decades following Caplow’s research and subsequently WWII,

witnessed counter cultural movements that would “opt out of the status-bound social order and acquire the stigmata of the lowly, dressing like bums, itinerant in their habits, folk in their musical tastes, and menial in the casual employment they undertake” (Turner 1969: 113). Not unlike “bohemians” of old, Turner is referring specifically to the beat and hippie movements, for whom “opting out” is a decision born of disillusionment. Smaller groups may be distinct by cultural, ideological, or behavioral differences. Generational differences are pertinent as succeeding generations learn from the former, reinterpreting and reproducing knowledge based upon preference and experience of individual and cultural bases.

The practice of trainhopping as a means to meet the strains of the modern era from the railroad boom simultaneously resulted in the means of free transportation for the sake of adventure. Hobos as a feature of Americana are marginal from inception as frontiersmen of industrialization to contemporary associations with homelessness, and liminal beings by way of a statelessness which circumvents the norms of predominant society. Generations of trainhoppers are comprised of myriad socioeconomic circumstances despite partaking in a practice attributable to marginal populations associated with bygone eras of economic depression. Following WWII, the Baby Boomer generation, born from a lineage with collective memory of depressions and hobos, came of age during the proliferation of automobiles and highway systems. Following postwar prosperity Boomers bore witness to a grand shift in social life as the globe was thrust into a state of flux between the American war in Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, and the Cold War that would cast a looming shadow over the

millennial generation to this day. Theodore Caplow states that “all vagrant classes show certain common characteristics in their relation to society” first and foremost being that “vagrancy as a mass phenomenon always arises in a period of rapid change and social disintegration, but may persist after the implementing conditions have disappeared” (Caplow 1940: 731). Upheaval on a mass scale is a process of competing powers, influences, and ideologies that rearrange the structure of society, altering the cultural and subcultural fabric of each generation both predominant and marginal.

Rather than being dormant through periods of stability the hobo remains in the public conscious, albeit as an ideation akin to the origin myth that grounds contemporary trainhopping culture. Trainhopping is attributed to the criminal or mentally ill of marginal society and the naïve adventure seeker; what is less commonly understood is how each such element may coalesce through shared discourse, myth, tradition, ideology and symbol.

## **2. “People still do that?”**

Folklore surrounding trainhopping has existed in predominant society through the historic hobo in folklore as an Americana icon of the depression era, in addition to films set close to the period such as “Emperor of the North” (1973) and “Boxcar Bertha,” (1972) depicting hobos as outlaws and folk heroes with lives of freedom and adventure. Set in the 1990s, the film “Into the Wild” has one brief scene of trainhopping which finds a “bull,” or railroad policeman, beating the protagonist, Christopher McCandless after dragging him off a boxcar. Festivals such as the Britt, Iowa Hobo festival annually

celebrate the spirit of hobo folklore, witnessing the arrival of trainhoppers for the festival, crowning a hobo king, and serving “mulligan stew,” a communal one pot stew of hobo lore in which the right to eat is earned through contribution. Oral tradition and folk knowledge are modes of cultural reproduction of which trainhopping culture is no exception, as apparent through a consistent presence in American history, film, literature and music. Artists of this tradition range from Jack London and Woody Guthrie, who would inspire later iterations of the troubadour life in the form of Jack Kerouac, Bob Dylan, and Merle Haggard. Growth of cultural material in these sonic and visual mediums provide greater access to subsequent generations and waves of prospective transients; distribution of hobo lore across a wider scope of cultural material thus grants a glimpse of trainhopping culture to individuals that may not otherwise have connected freight trains with free transportation. Visual media are not limited to purely fictitious renditions, as evidenced by documentary films such as “Hobo” (1992), “Catching Out” (2002), and “The American Hobo” (2003), to name just a few.

“*Who is Bozo Texino?*” (2007) by tramp Bill Daniels explores trainhopping past and present with a focus on railroad graffiti drawn by travelers. Tags were traditionally drawn with chalk, often on train cars, and had a few purposes such as a mark of having been through a particular area, or as was more common in times past, to let other transients know where one was heading. Tags commonly depict a moniker with individual flair incorporating artistic designs, symbolism, or a combination of the two. These designs are often accompanied by a date that the tag was drawn and occasionally an abbreviation for a general direction, for example: NBD for northbound, SBD for

southbound, and EBD, WBD, respectively. These tags usually adorn surfaces near “hopout” or “catch out” spots and can serve as some verification that an individual is waiting at the right spot depending on their destination. After a time tags become easily distinguished from other graffiti and some consistent symbolism occurs. Symbols incorporated into tags may include inverted Christian crosses (punk and metal culture influence), the squatter’s rights symbol (commonly associated with Anarchism), railroad tracks, arrows, or modifications to early hobo symbols intended to communicate messages to others. Cardboard signs used for receiving handouts or hitchhiking may be used as artistic medium as well, the borders of the sign may be decorated with previously mentioned accents or personal designs. Signs can sometimes be heard referred to as “cardboard credit cards” (also a song title by former transient busker band *Black Death All Stars*). When “flying a sign” or “panhandling” there are a couple notable themes in content, for example “Homeless + Hungry” as a simple message, lighthearted and clever “Obamas Not The Only One Hoping For CHANGE”, or simply “Traveling, Broke, Hungry.”

Hobo lore and hopping trains has persisted from the beginning of the practice, undergoing modifications through time and experiencing revitalization by social circumstances that push individuals to the margins, subcultures co-opting marginal practices, and individual wanderlust finding expression through such methods. Delving into trainhopping culture may thus occur due to four primary reasons, by no means exhaustive: 1. The necessity of personal circumstances. 2. Result of a general desire to travel. 3. An enculturation process through linkage to subcultural groups that overlap

with trainhopping culture musically, politically, etc. 4. Exposure to popular cultural material.

Throughout subsequent revitalizations trainhopping culture emerges as distinct, for as vernacular and symbolism may be altered over time, hobo folklore is nevertheless a historical precedent that makes up the consciousness of contemporary travelers. This culture is in many ways open to anyone with the requisite exposure to begin perceiving freight trains as transportation and symbols of freedom rather than mere industry. Availability of this sort has the potential for cultural dialogue between subsects of trainhoppers, as well as tension, as some groups may feel that trainhopping is being encroached upon by individuals who have not properly enculturated themselves and thus have no business near trains.

### **“Isn’t that dangerous?”**

Due to the reasons above, trainhopping puts one into contact with individuals from varied backgrounds and dispositions in spite of a prevalence of shared symbolism and other cultural expressions. Certain individuals and groups are dangerous, including fellow transients, not merely an exaggerated pejorative associated with the margins and trainhopping in general. In the lore of historic hobos, violence is inflicted upon trainhoppers by “bulls” or railroad police; while in public discourse marginal individuals are commonly perceived to be the perpetrators of violence. Both instances are true, if not oversimplified in particular cases, as inhabiting the margins should not necessarily imply violent tendencies but a greater susceptibility to violence due to circumstances and lifestyle. Despite a camaraderie among trainhoppers in relation to predominant society,

violence against each other still occurs through disagreements, drunken brawls, and at times consequential or intentional killing. In one 2011 case reported by the Richmond Times Dispatch, Robert Edward Dyck or “Yardsale” was found dead in the remains of a Volkswagen bus outside of the Richmond, VA Acca train yard. Yardsale had been beaten by fellow trainhoppers, Samuel E. Gase, “Satan,” and Brandon Thomas Geissler, “Roofless” who would later testify against Gase. According to the Times-Dispatch, Yardsale had been traveling to New Orleans with Lucille Obarzanek. Gase and Geissler claim that their attack was precipitated by Dyck’s assault on Obarzanek, while Obarzanek claims to have been passed out and not remember when this assault took place (McKelway 2011).

### **The FTRA – Bogeymen of the Rails**

Alcohol fueled disputes and fights occur and in some cases are swiftly resolved by intervention of other parties present, however violence on the road is also manifested through intimidation and murder. Four years prior to Yardsale’s death another murder had taken place outside the Richmond, VA Acca trainyard. Robert Chassereau, 46 was found beaten death with a piece of lumber by Michael Elijah Adams or “Dirty Mike.” Dirty Mike would go on to be convicted for several murders and sentenced to life in prison, where in interviews he claims status as an FTRA “enforcer” and claims to having committed more than 16 murders (Rockett 2016). The FTRA holds a murky reputation to those on the road, while it is perceived as a purely organized crime element according to law enforcement agencies. FTRA stands for “Freight Train Riders of America”, or as

some lore holds the initial founding abbreviation stood for “Fuck the Reagan Administration,” referring to social program budget cuts while the group is said to have been started by Vietnam veterans. To say that the FTRA holds a murky reputation is to speak to the ambiguity of the FTRA itself, for some individuals involved have been implicated in murder and other crimes, contrasted with the otherwise pleasant nature described of “old timer” FTRA by younger tramps around campfires, painting a picture more akin to the historic hobo archetype. The result is a group shrouded in mythos beyond the murder cases that caught media attention in the 80s and 90s.

Writing for the LA Times in 1997, Kim Murphy’s article covering the FTRA speaks to this ambiguity of reputation. Murphy tracks down Melford Lawson, said to be one of the founders of the FTRA, who “is persuaded to tell the story of the late-night meeting in Libby, Mont., when FTRA founder Daniel Boone, now a Pentecostal preacher in Montana, got together a group of friends in 1982 and suggested forming a group called “F--- the Reagan Administration” (Murphy 1997). Lawson goes on to state that “Now, they're trying to accuse us of every murder between here and Montana...Sure, there was Sidetrack, but how many Jeffrey Dahmers, John Wayne Gacys are there? He's like a bad apple, everybody's got one” (Murphy). Association with the group should not necessarily suggest ideological or organizational consistency as individuals may in fact go off to create their own rites of initiation or gang like tendencies under the same label.

Although the FTRA may in fact be defunct or never have existed as more than an informal organization or group of friends, individuals may gravitate towards the reputation of the FTRA garnered by individuals like Robert “Sidetrack/The Boxcar

Killer” Silveria, Anthony “Dogman Tony” Hugh Ross, and most recently Michael “Dirty Mike” Elijah Adams, associating with the group as a claim to street cred in terms of travel prowess, dangerousness, and protection. Therefore while an individual may falsely claim membership, simply making the claim may well betray a potential or propensity for violence, particularly if an individual is younger and possesses no obvious tie to the original founders or extensive experience.

The hobo in public consciousness exists as an idealized folk hero of American history and literature, and contemporaneously as an elusive figure of danger or unfortunate circumstance. The former highlights aspects of a historical artifact, while the latter is more closely associated with homelessness, mental illness, crime, and maladaptation; these are features no less prevalent in predominant than marginal society. Examination of the experiences of contemporary trainhoppers reveals patterns that seek to make sense of this reality through individual and cultural identity.

### **Structure of analysis**

Two respondents were selected for semi-structured interviews in order to determine patterns among contemporary trainhoppers; the two interviewed represent a similar enculturation processes and personal histories that coalesce into overlapping patterns of travel and trainhopping culture. Interviews were conducted between July 16<sup>th</sup> – July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017 in New Orleans, Louisiana, where each respondent had settled and established sedentary patterns of working and living in stable housing situations. Respondents were selected in part due to having stable living situations, allowing,

theoretically, for reflective answers and analysis of their own time on the road, and to provide a control for romanticized responses that may otherwise be given by trainhoppers still actively on the road. Concern about romanticized narratives is justified, as can be witnessed through numerous YouTube videos and articles on media outlets such as Vice News; both respondents stress that such outlets bear negative influence should those mediums be the only exposure that aspiring trainhoppers have reference to. Respondent ‘Loaf’ was already a contact from my own time on the road, and referred me to ‘Roscoe’ whom he had known during his own travels. Roscoe and Loaf make reference to punk, DIY and respective politics, requiring a brief survey of punk subculture to illustrate how overlap among the margins facilitates deeper enculturation.

## **Punks**

The confluence of cultural groups, predominant and marginal, produce ideological exchange through discourse. The “bourgeoisie” or “middle class” for instance imply a particular quality of life, but are not culturally homogenous. Conversely the same principle is applicable to groups that are marginal either by consequence (socioeconomic status, poverty, etc.) or in cases such as trainhopping culture, inhabiting the margins as a mode of autonomy and expression of independence. The concern of individual liberty in addition to community focused living is prevalent in hobo history, extolled by folk artists, and has intersected with American punk culture. Karoline Hjelle provides a succinct analysis in stating that “punk can be viewed as a music centered subculture characterized by the subversive sentiments it expresses – sonically,

discursively, and visually. Over the years, the culture has branched into a conglomerate of different subgenres, often differing radically from each other yet still remaining close enough to an original ethos to be defined as punk" (Hjelle 2013: 4). The original ethos is a general rejection of institutional authority, while a demarcation between genres influence how rejection of authority is expressed and asserted. Punk has "from the beginning been a culture dense with class symbolism" where "members have identified with assumed working class attributes and with disenfranchised and stigmatized groups" which Hjelle suggests "can be tied to bohemian ideals and to traditions springing from the educated middle class" (Hjelle 2013: 1). The analysis of punk provided by Hjelle situates the culture as one concerned with the margins of society as participants in punk culture suspend or seek to eradicate prevailing class distinctions. The concern of branches of punk with class and politics provides a rough distinction between punk as a "popular" genre focused on aesthetics of transgression, and punk as a culture that transcends those aesthetics to develop personal and political philosophies. 'Anarchy in the UK' was a popular slogan from the early period of punk. A slogan invoking anarchy served the purposes of punk to verbally reject authority, though as arguments would emerge as to whether or not "punk is dead," the culture of punk seemed to have receded into aesthetics, rather than the deeper, political, implications those aesthetics were intended to represent. Within punk subgenres have appeared, serving to undermine the reduction of punk to a naïve gesture of transgression, focusing instead on how punk culture ought to be lived in daily life. While rejection of authority is an ethos of punk, the question of how to reject authority, and why authority is being rejected is an ongoing

discourse within punk culture. Put simply, authority is antithetical to freedom and personal freedom is a fundamental concern of punk.

Anarchism developed as a libertarian parallel to socialism in the working class struggles of the 1800s, advocating a brand of socialism based upon free association of individuals rather than through an authoritative communist government. Anarchist theory would gradually make its way into punk music, resulting in a more direct political focus among artists across a range of punk subgenres. Common themes pick up from the prior subcultural generation emphasizing mutual aid and going further to propose abolition of state institutions, simultaneously inheriting portions of the socialist history that developed as a parallel to anarchism and the ideas exchanged between them. Punk would then become neither expressly anarchist, nor socialist, but more or less aware that ideology was available in a politicized cultural milieu. Within “anarcho” or “crust” punk music an ethic of resistance to consumerism, capitalism, and war are common. Early punk that would later be classified as “anarcho” and later “folk-punk” would call attention to labor struggles of the past and present and encourage solidarity with marginalized peoples. Within these subgenres especially, an emphasis on do-it-yourself (DIY) lifestyle persists as a means of participating as little as possible in established systems deemed exploitative. ‘DIY’ is not an *ethic* in the formal sense, however it serves as a guiding principle of self-sufficiency and freedom. In responding to predominant society these principles guide a range of techniques from urban foraging techniques in contemporary “hobohemian” spaces to hopping freight trains. These methods of

subsistence and transport provide further examples of the overlap in histories and cultures of marginal society.

### 3. Roscoe and Loaf

Roscoe began the interview describing a feeling of discontent with politics and a sense of stagnation that he had been feeling in his hometown of New Jersey, following his high-school graduation in the year 2000. He displayed a sense of self-determination, describing a sense of urgency from a young age to leave his hometown, emphasizing a feeling that it was up to him to make that happen. He described a need to find himself by experiencing different lifestyles that people lived as a mode of self-development. When asked if there was a specific destination in mind before traveling, Roscoe pointed to the west coast.

**Roscoe:** Northern California, the bay area was somewhere that I always loved, the culture growing up...the music coming out of there, the art...It was someplace I always wanted to see, whether someone paid for me to go there or not, I was going to make it there, hang out, meet people...Growing up in punk culture, I was basically just going where there's lots of music, lots of culture, places that are rich in culture.

Cultural exposure provided an introduction to new ideas and promise of further development as well as direction to aim towards in transit methods. Additionally, punk culture allows for *communitas*, making networking smoother even amongst individuals who otherwise are strangers to one another. Despite interest, neither Roscoe nor Loaf initially began traveling on freight trains.

**Loaf:** I didn't have a conventional start to my traveling, I didn't run into some trainhoppers in the US and start hopping trains. I was over in Europe trying to play soccer and I got involved in drugs pretty heavily again, and I quit, I just kind of quit and started squatting with a lot of people who were there and hanging out with a lot of punk kids in Europe, they didn't really hop trains but they traveled in big caravans and hitchhiked everywhere from squat to squat and city to city and that's what I started doing with them and that's where I ran into some American kids that had been hopping trains but were [now] over in Europe... I ended up back in the states after being deported from Europe and at that point it had already taken root and I had already been living that way for a while and remembered the American kids that I had met in Europe and was like "well shit, I'll try this. I'll hop trains in the states and see where this goes."

**Roscoe:** I bussed it around the country a little bit to get a feel for traveling on my own, I went out to California and literally three or four days after I arrived there, the first time I crossed the country 9/11 happened... When 9/11 happened and I got to see more of the west coast, a little taste of different lifestyles around the country, I was kind of like 'I want to keep doing this' [and] that was what sparked it, was that I saw...a lot of corruption, and no hope for the country in general. I kind of wanted to go off and do my own thing, and not work a 9 to 5 job, or anything that I probably should have been doing." [Laughs]

The attack on the World Trade Center and Roscoe's cynicism is important to note while recollecting Caplow's assertion that waves of transiency tend to occur during upheavals and social change that provide one more impetus for withdrawing from predominant society. Eventually Roscoe found his way into trainhopping through networking and becoming acclimated to traveling and life on the street.

**Roscoe:** Through my travels I met some train-riders but they weren't people I trusted, but they were interesting to me. I knew it was something I wanted to try, but the people that I met weren't great people...it took a while of being interested in it before I met [someone] that I trusted to show me the ropes. I met a girl in San Francisco, I had been hanging out on the streets of SF...I was probably there for too long at that point. She knew trains inside and out, she'd already been through Canada and

Mexico before I'd even gotten on a train...so we left Oakland and rode all the way to Green River, Wyoming from Oakland...that was the first time I did it. It was probably like three days, and by that time I already had a dog, and I was pretty well set in traveling, I just hadn't gotten on the train yet, once I took that first step [and] someone guided me in the right direction, I was hooked.

What causes trainhoppers to be hooked? Hopping one's first train is a first step into a distinct American culture, in addition to a particular perception and expression of freedom attached to the historical precedents written into the hobo of Americana. Loaf speaks to the ongoing tradition and appeal of wanderlust that is, for many, expressed through hopping trains.

**Loaf:** There's a very heavy allure and a lot of romanticism about just packing your shit up and leaving town, whether it's running from a bad relationship, a bad family life, trouble with the law, or just general dissatisfaction with your life or your government or whatever it is. It's written in songs and books and it's been a theme throughout this century.

Roscoe speaks also to a spontaneity in the evasion of structured life, where even in times of dissatisfaction an individual possesses at the very least a power to leave at will.

**Roscoe:** Some days, I do miss having no structure...I do miss the randomness of running into a friend in a new town that I didn't know was there. As far as train riding...I do miss being out in the middle of nowhere, or the feeling of waking up to sunrise on a train not really knowing where you are, having to guess where you are.

Riding trains affords an exploration of many parts of the country otherwise cutoff from the mainstays of modern life while casting off burdens one may feel attached to in

predominant society. As travelers become road weary, a return to sedentary life can become attractive, resulting in an inner tension between the freedoms afforded by traveling and the relative stability of settling down. Many travelers experience numerous instances of attempting to settle down, only to return to the road.

**Roscoe:** I don't have that tug of war anymore inside, and that took a while to get rid of that sense of 'I know that I want to start afresh and rejoin the working world, but I always know that I can jump right back into my traveling ways.' It was a while of me going back and forth, being unsure, and having false starts on getting my stuff together. A lot of times people helped me and I blew it off...I would attempt at it, and I would want it, but I didn't want it bad enough that I wouldn't go back to traveling. It wasn't until I wanted it bad enough that I did it [settled down]...I don't know what sparked that, and it was a struggle to get out of that routine.

Loaf's description of this feeling demonstrates where a sense of that desire to settle down come from as life on the road often proves to rough.

**Loaf:** It's a weird push and pull kind of thing...I did have some really great times and I do miss it sometimes. I miss the freedom of waking up and not having any sense of burden or stress really and if I was stressed about something I could just go to the next town and see what's there. I don't miss the survival, just that raw persona that you have to take on, especially if you start traveling alone a lot or you're around people who are also like that, it changes your nature a lot. The nature it changed me to I didn't really enjoy. Also the drugs, as glamorous and romanticized as it is it's still a really hard life, and meeting a completely sober trainhopper is a rare occurrence, it's almost an anomaly if you meet somebody that doesn't partake in any sort of depressant or drug or anything like that, something to suppress the fact that they're living the way they are.

The lore and practice of trainhopping joins together individuals who may have little in common save for a camaraderie in opposition to the norms of predominant society and shared transit methods. Roscoe had initially met trainhoppers whom he did not feel could be trusted, who came from different backgrounds and who he may not

otherwise, indeed *did not* initially interact with if not for the common link of trainhopping. Being introduced to trainhopping through a slow process of exposure with extensive influence in music based subculture, particularly punk, Roscoe stated that the diversity was alarming at first.

**Roscoe:** I did meet some likeminded people traveling who did come from a punk background, but I met *a lot* of [people] traveling who *didn't* have the same ideas or morals as me and that kind of threw me for a loop...They come from poor places, I would say – which is kind of like the same idea [as DIY] no one's going to pay for you to go travel if you come from the bottom of the barrel, so the only way you're going to get it done is just to get up and do it...I ran into that a lot, dealing with other homeless people, people that were out on the street...because of mental illness, or they're disillusioned with their home because either something [traumatic] happened, or they just wanted to get the hell out. So we had that in common, but we didn't always have the same ideals in common.

Loaf echoes a similar sentiment, succinctly demarcating the boundary between punk subculture that participates in trainhopping and the marginal individuals who have not been introduced through subcultural means but through inhabitation of the margins.

**Loaf:** The outliers from the punks are kids who usually were runaways from whatever city it was they're in and they happen to run into [someone] that was hopping a train or knew about it somehow from living on the streets. I call them the true punks and outlaws of trainhopping, [the] young kids who were really like escaping some fucked reality they had, some really terrible shit directly in their own homes. Those are the kids that I meet and people that I meet that tend to be out there for a very long time, either til they die, or they're very old. Punks tend to do it for a while and realize that they're not accomplishing the things that they wanted to accomplish. Whereas the outliers that are running from some fucked up things, they tend to be out there for a long time and they tend to group up much more. Those are the ones in packs of like 10 or 15 of them rolling down the street. It's weird too, because a lot of the punk kids that travel are really shitty to those people, the other subsets of trainhoppers. They're a lot less willing to interact with them, whereas I see the old, old trainhoppers, like the guys that predated any of the punks hanging out with

them and being kind at least, drinking or whatever, kicking it with them. If anything I feel like the punks are the outliers and the outcasts of trainhopping because sometimes I feel like some of us don't truly belong there.

Loaf is highlighting that his home circumstances did not necessitate street life in the manner that drives many onto the street as a way to escape worse circumstances. This idea of necessity frames a debate about authenticity between motivations for taking to the rails as an escape from personal circumstances in the case of runaways, versus a disillusionment that culminates in rejection of norms found in predominant society.

To the unaccustomed eye the difference between the homeless and transients is likely to be unapparent, for the margins of American society, particularly in urban settings are inhabited by myriad groups with overlapping methods of subsistence. Differentiation between marginal individuals is subtle for those outside of the margins and likely to be unimportant. However, individuals within the margins must learn to navigate carefully through a world that operates without formal rules and is in a sense separated from the laws and norms of predominant society. Returning to the fact that trainhopping is practiced by individuals of many class and cultural backgrounds, trainhopper culture visibly emerges from within this diversity as a system of shared history, vernacular, symbolism, practices, and relation to society at large. As Roscoe points out above, this culture does not necessarily entail individuals of similar beliefs and yet each may identify and interact with one another possessing an understanding of themselves within a culture that exists as one of many within the heterotopia of marginal society. Knowing which visual cues to look for, raiment usually distinguishes

trainhoppers from other inhabitants of the margins and even other transients who may utilize different methods such as hitchhiking. Roscoe refers to “the uniform” to describe this manner of dress that commonly entails military or hiking backpacks, bandanas, boots, and brands of rugged work clothes. Equipment utilized then has the potential to suggest an individual’s experience or lack thereof, including how worn-in articles of clothing are, if articles are patched together, and which type of backpack is used.

**Roscoe:** They [common traveling raiment] work in that [transitory] atmosphere, Carhartts are tough, they last, they’re for the weather...which is funny because after years of this you can spot someone who is fresh because they haven’t learned through trial and error that a pickle pack isn’t the best pack to have if you’re going to be stuck walking miles...So as an experienced traveler you can start to spot out the things that differentiate you from being fresh on the road and being someone who is doing this the most efficient way...And that can be deceiving the whole uniform thing...because you might roll up to a spot where some people are hanging out who are traveling and they might at first glance look like some people that you would get along with and after a couple minutes of hanging out drinking with them, you’re going to realize these are *not* your people at all.

Roscoe’s statement demonstrates the knowledge that is developed through time on the road provides one with both an eye and ear for locating other trainhoppers within a marginal group, as well as the fact that such culture may not constitute a reason for interaction, and indeed may be cause for avoiding interaction as motivations or personality may be cause for concern.

**Roscoe:** With the alcoholism and the substance abuse, the pressures of that lifestyle, people are violent, people are dangerous, people are aggravated and touchy. And they’re also like living amongst people who have *no* hope so if you’re young and you’re using this method to see the country, experience new things, meet new people, you’re going to be

brushing shoulders with people who might be Vietnam vets who drink a bottle of liquor when they wake up and are miserable. You're going to be intertwined *everyone* who lives outside [outdoors] which is a broad spectrum of lifestyles and people...I feel like after time and experience you start to get an eye for it, and you start to realize who you want to avoid and who you're willing to let in your bubble so to speak. I don't want to be sitting with people who have wildly different views than me...like the whole idea of me going off on my own and pushing myself to travel is that I don't need to rely on someone, so after all that work to get to that point where I'm self-sufficient why would I choose to go sit with someone who is racist, or who is going to get me in more trouble behind some shit I don't even believe in...sometimes that keeps you out of trouble.

In such a range of individuals within marginal society I asked Loaf and Roscoe whether they observed a main demographic among trainhoppers.

**Loaf:** Young white males. I think it has a lot to do with the disenfranchisement that a lot of young white kids feel, not really facing any real adversity but still feeling off-put by a lot of stuff and unsettled and lost. But that's when I was first starting out, as it went on it changed, I met people from all over all different ethnicities and races and different genders, it just kind of exploded out to all different people. Maybe because a lot of the people I first met were older and I would imagine 20, 30 years ago it was probably not very safe for certain people of certain colors or genders to be hopping trains with a lot of kooked out old Vietnam war veterans and I met a lot of older trainhoppers that are racist as hell, they're racist and they're predatory.

**Roscoe:** It's everyone...Every race, color, creed. You can drop out of where you came from, it is accepting. That's what made it even harder for me to idly sit by and watch people with racist, sexist attitudes sit right next to a person of color, a person of different sexual orientation, and talk down on them, and then pass them a beer. And I'm just like 'what is going on here' and I guess that might be part of a bigger picture in our country...Either they come from abusive families, or like a hopelessness, but that's in every culture. Or they're just young and want to get out and have fun...I don't care what color, creed, what your background or upbringing is, whether you came from money or the poor side of town, I guess it all boils down to what you want to do with your time.

Roscoe went into further detail describing a dense presence of privileged middle class whites, often males, who inhabit the margins and hop trains. Individuals of this particular stripe commonly arrive through similar avenues as Roscoe, through various subcultures such as punk that mingle with other marginal inhabitants. In this confluence of people's subsistence strategies entail methods common to the marginal and dispossessed, as well as an emphasis on communal distribution with linkage to hobo and contemporary trainhopper culture. Additionally, Roscoe's description of resource allocation highlights the oral, and more ideal learning through enculturation and the example set by seasoned travelers.

**Roscoe:** I learned through trial and error. I learned from older travelers...I got food stamp cards in different states, I panhandled *a lot*, I flew cardboard signs on highway off-ramps and I was more of a loner so I tended to go off and panhandle by myself so that I didn't have to split up any of my earnings, which was never hard for me to do. There's a big thing that happens with kids who travel in packs where they pressure one another to put all the earnings towards alcohol, or 'oh you're going to use that money on food? No that money is all going to alcohol' which to me was the most absurd attitude ever... I wasn't afraid to pick up a food stamp card in Oregon, and then a couple of months later pick up another food stamp card in New Mexico until it caught up to me...If you have two food stamps cards you got one for food and you got one you can sell for cash. It's not hard to grasp the idea, but you have to see someone doing it first before it really hits you, like 'oh okay, they're breaking the law' and that shit does catch up to you later on in life.

Roscoe's response also points to the negotiation of communal distribution, where particular groups may insist on the dedication of funds to substances rather than fresh food. Allocation of resources illustrates not simply a common commitment to alcohol consumption, but the fact that food is more easily acquired through urban foraging

methods such as dumpster diving, trash picking in busy bar districts, food pantries, and distributions such as food kitchens. Inquiring further into non-work resource distribution, Roscoe emphasizes the overlap of hobo and street codes, both likely emerging alongside one another in ongoing exchange of subsistence strategies.

**Roscoe:** There are some codes of the street that you follow where if someone is seen as not sharing, the majority of the group will call them out and be like ‘hey no that’s all of ours’, and it’s communal. But there can be another side of that where some people can be alienated and just pushed out and get nothing and told to fuck off, ‘fend for yourself now, you’re done, you’re not welcome anymore’ and sometimes through a drunken haze that shits all mixed up... These people aren’t always spot on every time, I feel like it varies group to group, or like its case specific, but for the most part the younger kids that are traveling in packs or who are out here meeting up and drinking together in packs, there’s like an unspoken code for making sure that everybody gets their part of the liquor, or their part of the food... It comes from an older hobo [code] I think, and I know that the older hobos of the 40s and 50s had a lot of codes like that they lived by and some of the younger kids have picked up on that, and some of them haven’t... it comes down to how much you care about the people you’re doing this thing with, or how much you don’t care about them.

The good of the group is important but not a strict virtue, as individuals are free to associate or dissociate from one another (presumably) at will. Expectation of receiving benefit from the group does, however, necessitate contribution to the group. Status differences in this setting are not strictly recognized as the strongest but on the most experienced, status being based upon respect for that recognized experience rather than just on raw power.

**Roscoe:** I don’t think there’s any way to jump in it and know what you’re doing from the beginning and that kind of has to be earned. I guess with

the uniform and everything that shows, I say it jokingly but it actually is real ‘oh you’re Carhartts are way worn in, you must have been doing this for a while, I respect you for that, you might be a horrible person but I respect you because you look road weary and worn and experienced’ I don’t really buy into it so much, but I can see how younger people who are fresh look up to the more experienced...It doesn’t always mean those people are going to help you or even be kind to you...It’s kind of an unspoken thing, you can know, after long enough you can meet someone and catch the drift about whether they’re knowledgeable about this shit or not. It isn’t openly shared though, the things that you learn throughout trial and error in that lifestyle, most people aren’t willing to hand down that knowledge to the younger kids.

In fact this reluctance to pass on street and cultural knowledge may be perceived as resistance to the new waves of travelers whose behavior may make life difficult for other transients. Even within cadres of the experienced, Roscoe mentions that there are individuals who exploit resources for others, “blowing up the spot” by being belligerent or violent, giving a bad reputation for others who will pass through a given area. A perusal of the historical record shows that this is a common concern as venturing from the margins into the view of predominant society must be done with care to avoid trouble. This conclusion should not suggest that an experienced traveler cannot prove to be a nuisance, but that this tendency will be more likely among newer travelers that do not have experience as a mediator for their behavior.

#### **4. Train lines, WiFi, and Cultural Lineage**

Dissemination of hobo lore occurred through cultural material in the form of film, literature, music, and mostly recently social media, ultimately being revitalized by

subcultures consuming those materials. Roscoe and Loaf point to this process and the effect of that exposure.

**Roscoe:** I feel like when it wasn't all over social media, and you couldn't click on a website and see that people live this way, when you actually had to really, really want to put forth the effort to go out there and find other people who are living that way, and work towards living that way because it can be a lot of hard work, then that cuts out a lot of people who aren't in it for the right reasons... Maybe it's always been that, and I'm just jaded and the same thing was said about me by people just as much older as me when I started, maybe it's a constant cycle and it will always be that way. I do feel that the game has changed with the whole smart phone, technology.

**Loaf:** Technology has definitely changed trainhopping as far as making it accessible and easier, I guess. But also far more exposed now too...[more people] learn about it and blow up yards...how many millions of people watch Vice? And Vice does a documentary on trainhopping, well kind of trainhopping. [I] think back to me being 16, some 16 year old kid sees that and it just starts the cycle all over again, they're like "oh fuck that looks cool I want to do that."

Thus, this process emerges in a more organic manner for those who were required to network their way into a culture through ever increasing immersion. The amount of time necessary to transmit cultural knowledge, and consistent associated factors (*disillusionment, economic plight etc.*) has been diminished considerably with greater communications access, increasing the rate of alteration of cultural features and codes, demonstrating the influence of technology on culture. The effect of technology has in this case exposed trainhopping culture to a wider audience, not simply those that are already on the margins or drawn there through particular subcultures, but the expanse of the internet where individuals with limited prior enculturation seek initiation into the realm of riding trains.

**Roscoe:** One of the biggest things that I saw happen, with the blowing up of the internet and social media and websites, I have to say LATFO (Look at this Fucking Oogle) which is a blog that posts pictures of train riding kids...you have a whole younger generation of kids whose only reference to wanting to be in that lifestyle or culture or anything, is what they're seeing on that blog. There's a whole group of kids that would never have gotten into it if it wasn't for that one specific website and you saw that come out after a couple years and then certain nicknames that we had for those people in the past, became terms of endearment. Like, calling someone an 'oogle' used to be one of the biggest insults you could give someone which, has throughout that transition, is now like 'whatsup oogle, brother, friend.'

Asked about what “oogle” originally implied as an insult, he pointed to behavior linked to a lack of experience in addition to a type of trainhopper that gives a negative impression of other transients or does not consider their needs in terms of resources.

**Roscoe:** Someone who was like a poser, or someone who didn't grasp what was happening but wanted to emulate it, or just look like it...I don't even hate those people either, it's like imitation is the highest form of flattery, they're trying they just haven't caught on to what's *really* going on. You going to hate someone for that? But now it's kind of like a joke, more of a fun thing, instead of just ‘those are the people that make us look bad’. Or like originally it was like the people who came and used the techniques of the traveler to use up all the resources, fly the sign all day...just do everything irrationally, just not caring about burning it out for the next person, ‘blowing up the spot’...those are the oogles, the people that don't care about any of that shit.

As Roscoe noted above, LATFO was specifically designed as a kind of joke website where travelers typically posted pictures of their friends partying in squats, under bridges, or on trains. That website is but one example of trainhopping presence on the internet; news and media sites, city blogs and YouTube provide stories of “oogles,” “gutterpunks,” and “traveler kids,” some outlets having made the connection between the overlap of marginal individuals and hobo practices. Brief snapshots of traveling life and

LATFO are not the only internet sources; there are websites designed as resources for travelers as well, serving as a space to discuss travel tips, ask advice, discuss history, and meet other travelers.

Squat The Planet (STP) is described as “an internet forum for nomads and aspiring wanderers.” Rather than needing to meet others on the road, STP provided a forum website that allowed users to discuss traveling with much greater efficiency. There are sections to post meetup requests, provide help for newer travelers, and obituaries for travelers that have “caught the westbound.” One posting that has been pinned by admins for maximum visibility is a section outlining an ethical code said to be set down by the “Tourist Union #63 during its 1889 National Hobo Convention in St. Louis Missouri,” a hobo union, as guidelines to live by as a hobo and which appear to exist in some fashion on the street as Roscoe and Loaf point to codes of conduct on the street and those of this particular historical precedent. The historic hobo as origin myth is invoked here, the line of descent being drawn to connect a certain type of behavior with a common origin and social conduct. The guidelines listed are as follows:

1. “Decide your own life, don’t let another person run or rule you.
2. When in town, always respect the local law and officials, and try to be a gentleman at all times.
3. Don’t take advantage of someone who is in a vulnerable situation, locals or other hobos.
4. Always try to find work, even if temporary, and always seek out jobs nobody wants. By doing so you not only help a business along, but ensure employment should you return to that town again.
5. When no employment is available, make your own work by using your added talents at crafts.
6. Do not allow yourself to become a stupid drunk and set a bad example for locals’ treatment of other hobos.
7. When jungling in town, respect handouts, do not wear them out, another hobo will be coming along who will need them as bad, if not worse than you.
8. Always respect nature, do not leave garbage where you are jungling.
9. If in a community jungle, always pitch in and help.

10. Try to stay clean, and boil up wherever possible.
11. When traveling, ride your train respectfully, take no personal chances, cause no problems with the operating crew or host railroad, act like an extra crew member.
12. Do not cause problems in a train yard, another hobo will be coming along who will need passage through that yard.
13. Do not allow other hobos to molest children, expose all molesters to authorities, they are the worst garbage to infest any society.
14. Help all runaway children, and try to induce them to return home.
15. Help your fellow hobos whenever and wherever needed, you may need their help someday.
16. If present at a hobo court and you have testimony, give it. Whether for or against the accused, your voice counts!” (Squat The Planet, 2016).

Examination of these codes with the understanding that contemporary transients hold them in esteem proves instructive. Although informants did not quote directly from a codified ethics, there was mention of newer waves of trainhoppers not having as much respect for riders, railroad employees, and local citizens and authorities. This testimony should not suggest that every trainhopper regards citizens and authorities with deference, but that certain types of behavior draw unwanted attention to transients, resulting in a town being “blown up” or “hot” with police activity and disdain by locals or railroad staff.

The pinned content on STP may be an effort to address this; several pinned threads have a wealth of information aimed at individuals who may find their way to the forum with the intention of traveling on the margins. Despite the availability of this knowledge a strong emphasis is placed on not taking to the road or rails alone, but with an individual who has prior traveling experience. The information provided attempts to address common questions and issues for those who would be new to the road; the availability of this compiled information has become wider spread and arguably more necessary in the last decade as new waves of travelers come of age during a time of increasing exposure on the internet, thus expanding the influence of these ideas –

separated from the oral transmission of information necessitated in times past. Separated from oral transmission and enculturation, the entrance into this culture is achieved less through immersion than an exposure to symbols of increasingly muddled context. STP then seeks to protect trainhopping culture by providing guidance to the inexperienced and resources for the experienced, insulating newer forum members from specific types of information or granting access to trainhopping related forums following a probationary membership. Pertinent train information such as times and specific points of departure are not found on STP as such information is not only difficult to obtain, but illegal to post online and individuals asking for such information are warned for doing so. Another safety measure taken by STP includes a board for members to post warnings to one another regarding shady travelers and other individuals.

Roscoe's assertion that some "travel for the wrong reason," STPs work to keep aspiring travelers safe, and a general concern for codes and conduct, demonstrate a concern with preserving a common culture. This fact, taken with reverence for the train and a consciousness of historical precedent, form a linkage between otherwise disparate individuals. Trainhopping as a culture rather than mere practice precedes the rise of consumer culture and the information age, subsequently becoming revitalized through cultural material and internet access. The mode of revitalization will affect the manner of introduction to trainhopping, yet upon stepping into that milieu of travel, one develops train experience, street smarts, and a common language with other trainhoppers. In this social context individuals learn norms through direct interaction and historical precedent in hobo lore, ultimately mediated by experience on the street to include a common ethic

of communal distribution. As Roscoe pointed out this does not negate the potential for frequent conflict of ideology, rather that individuals from numerous cultural affiliations and ideologies are likewise trainhoppers. Additionally Roscoe points to derogatory terms that trainhoppers use for *other* trainhoppers that, as Roscoe notes, “make us look bad.” Anderson asserts that “change is characteristic of tramp terminology and tramp jargon. Words assume different meanings as they are extensively used, or they become too general in their use and newer terms are invented. Many of the names by which types are designated were at first terms of derision, but terms seem to lose their stigma by continued use” (Anderson 1923, 99). In the contemporary context, “oogle” as an insult was satirically claimed by a particular type and thus fell out of strict use as an insult.

Despite these divergences between individuals the common culture persists, surviving modification over time. As individuals arrive from a myriad of motivations and socioeconomic circumstances, this fact can cause ribaldry and conflict in an environment of structural negation. This does not necessarily entail shunning or being ostracized for a particular social background unless that identity is brought to bear on asserting dominance, in which case individuals may be implored to call their parents to have money sent, or experience heckling where “go call mom for a western union” questions individual mettle, travel prowess, and implicitly one’s very right to travel. In this example an individual known to be from a privileged background may be encouraged or coerced to ask for money, or accosted outright for stinginess. Thus unconscious deployment of one’s socioeconomic status belies poor enculturation, implying aloofness. By contrast, an individual may choose to not discuss home circumstances while striving

to negate the apparent presence of those circumstances through enculturation and adoption of marginal subsistence strategies.

## Conclusion

Hopping trains is rooted in the idealized hobo archetype of the great depression: the penniless adventurer wandering from town to town, dodging railroad bulls and corrupt authorities, seeking work where possible and handouts when necessary: an American folk hero in essence. The Hobo archetype is a marginal persona in this regard due to social circumstances with related economic hardships, in addition to the romanticized spirit of insatiable wanderlust. Individuals arrive in this particular zone of marginality through socioeconomic circumstances, ambivalence to society, and a desire to travel. This confluence of each motivation shows trainhopping as a particular understanding of freedom, for not all destitute, marginalized individuals, cultural groups, nor each aspiring wanderer ultimately take to the rails. Personal histories and motivations for hopping trains have been shown above to be numerous, yet the shared symbol of the freight train and the archetype hobo draw common threads. In these shared symbols are discourses, knowledge shared or withheld, politics, social ills, ongoing histories and revitalized images. Turner's theory of liminality proves instructive in this application, as liminal individuals are those in a state of transiency who may or may not enculturate themselves or be assimilated; indeed the cogency of trainhopping as a distinct culture rather than mere practice is witnessed through fluidity. Developing an acquaintance with this symbolism precipitates enculturation depending on the

circumstances of exposure. Life circumstances may force an individual to make departure by any means available. Music, film and literature have carried the songs of the Great Depression troubadour into the contemporary period, available to prod any aspiring wanderer. While subcultures, such as punk, identifiable with anti-consumer-culture ethos, DIY ethics, and class politics, interact with marginal spaces as places of negation and alternative living. Despite these divergences between individuals the common culture persists, surviving modification over time.

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